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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [JA](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: (C) REVOLUTION IN DECLINE, LE KIEN THANH ON MEDIA AND  
CORRUPTION

REF: A. A) HCMC 103 "KEY OFFICIALS INVOLVED IN PCI CORRUPTION ARRESTED"

[1](#)B. B) HANOI 60 "NINTH PARTY PLENUM"

[1](#)C. C) HCMC 153 "VETERAN DEMOCRACY DISSIDENTS SPEAK OUT"

[1](#)D. D) 08 HANOI 783 "PROMINENT VIETNAMESE BUSINESS LEADER DISCUSSES  
CHALLENGES"

[1](#)E. E) 07 HANOI 110 "LE DUAN: THE MOSTLY VARNISHED TRUTH"

CLASSIFIED BY: Kenneth J. Fairfax, Consul General, U.S.

Consulate General Ho Chi Minh, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Whether high-profile international bribery cases like Pacific Consultants International (PCI) or informal fees for a check up at the local clinic, Vietnam is beset by corruption because special interests have monopolized decision-making and the country lacks an effective media, according to Dr. Le Kien Thanh, Director of Thien Minh (a diversified trading company) and the son of former Secretary General Le Duan. This realization leads some in the Party to consider how best to manage change, and others to try to benefit from the system before time runs out. In this environment, Thanh believes HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai is unlikely to be held accountable for any role in the PCI bribery scandal. End summary.

PCI Saga Unwinding  
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[1](#)2. (C) Le Kien Thanh launched immediately into a diatribe on the PCI corruption case against former HCMC Department of Transportation Director Huynh Ngoc Si (ref A) during a meeting with EconOff on February 23. Rumors have been flying for months that HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai would be forced out and replaced because of his links to the high-profile PCI scandal, Thanh said, and "three or four weeks ago the rumors were very close to true. But there has been a decided change and now everyone is acting like Hai is safe and secure again." (Note: Thanh was likely referring to discussions in and around the Central Committee Plenum (ref B) January 5-15). "Months ago the Japanese gave tapes to the Government of Vietnam (GVN) naming names," Thanh explained, "but the rest of us still don't know how many high officials are behind Si and one person alone couldn't provide enough protection to Si." Thanh now believes that there is little chance the investigation will have consequences for Si's backers, most notably HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai.

Revolution in Decline  
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[1](#)3. (C) Thanh dismissed any serious role for Vietnam's current media outlets in uncovering corruption. "Newspapers editors don't matter when the media is weak and systematically manipulated," Thanh assessed, "but the replacement of the editors of Phap Luat, Thanh Nien and Tuoi Tre together represent a step backwards for democracy." His father Le Duan struggled and "sacrificed lives" to print and distribute a newspaper that undermined the French in his day, recalled Thanh, adding he believes the GVN recently dismissed these newspaper editors

because it feels "weak and vulnerable" in the same way that French colonizers were weak. The party and government are afraid, Thanh continued, at seeing their ability to "guide the people" grow more and more limited. (Comment: While this is an interesting insight into how Thanh views the media as a political tool, filial piety clouds his comparison, since Le Duan was certainly no champion of press freedoms during his tenure as Secretary General. End comment.)

¶4. (C) The natural response to insecurity is to focus on short-term personal benefits (e.g., corruption) and Thanh says this has caused a rise in the influence of political interest groups in Vietnam. Corruption is commonplace even in the most basic services that the GVN owes its people, like education and health care because special interests in the Ministries (or even state-owned enterprises) now dominate these sectors, he stated. The structure of the Government of Vietnam with monopolized decision-making leads to corruption, Thanh assessed.

Change with Time  
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¶5. (C) People are now focused on their daily needs but "in the near future the demand for democracy will bloom" because while the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) led the resistance and reunification, it doesn't seem able to put the country's interest above its own. Thanh pointed to a wall of photos with him next to party leaders, culminating in a recent photo with current Party Secretary Nong Duc Manh at his residence (and sporting a Hawaiian shirt), "Politburo members understand that the Party will either transform itself or it will be transformed by the people. The Soviet party was stronger (than the CPV) but we know it was swept away." Thanh said he recently questioned two (unnamed) Party leaders about the future of the Party. The first said that preparing for the inevitable is the key to successfully managing the transition. The second laughed and asked, "Who would be Vietnam's Gorbachev?"

Comment:  
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¶6. (C) If we take Thanh at his word, many in the Party are dissatisfied with the direction the country is moving and are willing to engage in spirited discussion, at least among themselves. Much of what Thanh said about corruption and the media could as easily have come from any of Vietnam's well-known dissidents, particularly Father Ly and other members of Bloc ¶8406. Thanh's comments on the evolution of the Party matched rebel monk Thich Quang Do's own opinion almost verbatim (ref C). The difference, of course, is Thanh's impeccable CPV family pedigree; he is also much more selective about his audience. A more cynical reading points to Thanh's father Le Duan, CPV General Secretary from 1975 to 1986, who, many would argue, drove Vietnam to the brink of ruin and who casts a long shadow even well after his death. Thanh's brother, Le Kien Trung, is Director General of the HCMC Custom's office, a position widely rumored to be one of the most lucrative and sought after government posts in Vietnam. This insider pedigree hasn't kept Thanh from looking outward, though, as his son Le Kien Dung studied at California State University - Pomona. End comment.

¶7. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

BENNETT